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Counting the Costs of Car Culture

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COUNTING THE COSTS OF CAR CULTURE

by

Brooke Clayton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Journalism and Mass Communication

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Counting the Costs of Car Culture

Brooke Clayton

University of Iowa

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Why it's Time for a Mobility Rights Movement in the U.S.

“A road now is like a million and a half dollars a mile,” Dan McGehee says.

His role at the University of Iowa far exceeds his classroom in the College of Engineering. As Director of the National Advanced Driving Simulator, he is in an integral part of our national public policy on transportation safety, addressing driving hazards, substance abuse issues, and U.S. car culture. He has been a principal or co-principal investigator of over \$40 million in research for the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and the automotive and computer industries; to name only the biggest investors.

He has been operating automated vehicle simulators in Iowa City since before the turn of the century. He has years' worth of knowledge as to just how lethal driving is in our country, and his dream is to change that harsh reality:

“We kill about 37-38,000 people by our roads every year in the US,” he states. “Over 1 million people a year die worldwide. So, this is a significant public health issue, and we're developing the technologies to reduce the severity and eliminate these crashes altogether.”

But who's we? Who is ultimately responsible for these deaths?

He lists the most common killers on the road as drunk drivers, texting drivers, distracted drivers in general...which makes his job increasingly difficult, as young drivers make it clear that today, as he puts it, “people want to stay on their phones, stay online—driving itself is the distraction.”

This is why for McGehee, raising awareness is a huge part of his job.

He explains, “we think it's very important as a public health issue that people understand that crashes have causes, and they need to understand what causes crashes so they can help eliminate those things. So...don't refer to them as accidents.”

Despite this good intention, public outreach is not doing enough to combat the dangers of distracted driving. The U.S. has decreased traffic fatalities in recent years, but at a rate over 20 percent slower than countries with comparable socioeconomic status, like France, Germany, Spain, and the UK.

With limited success eliminate distractions for drivers, research at places like NADS has turned toward eliminating the drivers themselves. Throwing money at McGehee, the government seems to hope that automated technology can save us from ourselves.

But is this really the best solution?

The same year that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) compared our decline in car deaths to similar countries and found that we're behind, a non-profit group called the American Public Transportation Association investigated the same data to discover something not-so-surprising.

They published a 70 page report titled “[The Hidden Traffic Safety Solution: Public Transportation.](#)”

Their analysis was thorough, but ultimately, simple: “Despite declining crash rates in recent decades, the U.S. is maintaining its poor ranking because we drive more than peer countries.”

Nations across the world are realizing that traffic fatalities are, indeed, a public health issue, but that responsibility does not have to fall on the driver, as McGehee claims. Perhaps the driver isn't the only thing needs to be eliminated. Maybe the car does too.

If public transportation will save lives, why is it a “hidden” solution in the U.S.?

Who is hiding it?

Nowhere on the CDC’s [page](#) do they recommend what seems to be the simplest solution to combat car crashes: reducing reliance on the car. They do say to “choose not to drive while impaired by alcohol or drugs,” but this choice may not be any easier intoxicated than it is sober, given that Americans have virtually no accessible public transportation outside of major cities.

Life in the U.S. necessitates driving. Using public transportation isn’t really something the CDC *can* suggest when it’s so impractical for most people. They could suggest *creating* accessible public transportation; yet while the page offers solutions for what “drivers and passengers *can*” do, for what “states *can*” do, and for what “health care providers *can*” do, their large-scale solutions are limited to the present moment and a vague list of what “the federal government *is*” doing. In short, the U.S. government is treating this “public health issue” as a personal one, when structural changes would offer better solutions to driving-related fatalities and injuries.

When asked about the possibility of applying his research to public transportation, McGehee says that “Uber and Lyft are spending billions with a b, billions, of dollars on figuring out how to automate ride hailing,” but he does not mention mass transit.

That investment in ridesharing forecasts that the personal vehicle will reign supreme, even if it is one day shared as a public good. This gives investors the green flag to continue pouring money in to roads, rather than something like rails.

“Iowa has invested in roads like Highway 20 in the North and Highway 30 around the middle and to the south because they feel like having modern, open lane freeways brings commerce to the state,” McGehee explains.

But where did the idea come from that highways equate commerce? How is the state guaranteed to get a payout from what, at \$2 million dollars a mile, seems to be a gamble?

“The notion of the freeway was kind of born of the Eisenhower administration,” McGehee tells me, “because in World War II, they learned they had to move big stuff all across the entire country.”

Eisenhower’s push to create a federal highway system was originally part of the national defense. And at the same time as touting his *freeway* to the American public, he established The *Highway* Trust Fund, an agglomeration of federal resources that continues to shape our roads, and therein, our lives.

Anthropologist Catherine Lutz reveals in her book *Carjacked* that in the US, you are never more than 22 miles from the nearest road. The Federal Highway Administration self-proclaims that every consumer good travels on the interstate system at one point or another, and in fact our food typically takes a 1,500 to 2,500 mile journey “from farm to table,” according to the [Worldwatch Institute](#). On a federal and state level, then, the importance of these roads has little to do with the people it transports and far more to do with the commerce it facilitates.

So much so, that The Highway Trust Fund actually allows the federal government to influence state policy.

When the U.S. wanted a uniform drinking age of 21, they threatened to revoke highway funds from any state that did not cooperate. Today, a state could still decide to lower that age, but they don’t, because they would effectively bankrupt themselves. The [bill](#) allowing this was passed in 1984, and while it seems to exploit a loophole in the 10th amendment assuring that states have

the right to any power not explicitly given to the federal government, it was upheld in the Supreme Court in 1987.

Today, Eisenhower's fund is mainly supported by excise taxes on gasoline and diesel fuel—taxes which amassed a staggering [35.6 billion alone in 2018](#)—meaning that our personal vehicles continue to fuel the decade long interdependency between federal power and driving.

Our country needs roads for commerce and our gasoline-powered vehicles to pay for those roads.

Is it really any surprise, then, that the current administration in the is [deeply invested in fossil fuels](#) and [unafraid to override state's rights](#) ' to the land that fuel sits under? That our president is vehemently opposed to climate data [urging out the gasoline powered vehicle](#)? It is any surprise that the money has been focused, instead, on wowing us with technological hypotheticals which McGehee is the first to admit are much farther off than the media has led us to believe?

With all the money being poured in to and literally paved onto U.S. roads, there seems to be an intense trepidation about admitting there might be a better way, that maybe, the problem isn't necessarily *how* we are driving, but the fact that we have to drive at all, that we're so often left with no other choice.

McGehee doesn't have a bad vision for the future. He imagines that ride sharing might make cars a sort of public property, an efficient system of continuous shuttling. With no drivers, there would be no distractions, no speeding, and no intoxication. There would be, in theory, no crashes. He throws me a bone as far as sustainability and says that maybe these cars would even be electric, left charging in a corral somewhere away from the city when they aren't in use. There would be no greenhouse gas emissions, and get this, no parking garages.

The only problem is that this vision is still 20 years away, or even more, because that's the amount of time it takes to cycle through the entire fleet of U.S. cars, when they already outnumber the entire fleet of U.S. citizens and continue to reproduce faster than we do.

"It will essentially be 2040 before 90 percent of vehicles have this specific safety technology," he says.

In the meantime, the same issues of equity and accessibility that come with driving today will only increase, as those lower on the socioeconomic ladder will face not only an aesthetic difference in what they drive, but a performative one. Poorer people will have a higher chance of dying on the road. It's that simple.

And all the while, our cars will continue to pollute the earth at alarming rates, killing our planet with the same tenacity that people are killed in traffic.

So, I have to ask, again... is this *really* the best solution?

At the office of Darian Nagle-Gamm, tucked inside a parking garage, it's clear that the City of Iowa City hasn't given up on transit. In fact, it's one of Nagle-Gamm's central focuses as the newly appointed Transportation Director.

It's only her second year in the position, and she says she had to spend the first one mostly orienting herself with the day-to-day duties of the job. Now that she has found her footing, though, she's ready to shake the foundations of transportation in this rapidly expanding city.

"It's just exciting, you know," she says, her eyes revealing just how much she means it, "the last 20, 30, 40 years, I think this position probably looked very much the same. But now, we're in an era where things are really changing, and they're changing very rapidly."

The biggest change?

“It’s not just about cars anymore,” she says, “it’s all about mobility.”

Her first order of business when she was appointed to her position was to call for a comprehensive review of Iowa City’s current transit system. She’s close to hiring a contractor to do that work, determined to learn as much as she possibly can.

“At the end of the day, we will have looked in every nook and cranny, behind every corner, and lifted every rock to see what we can do to improve our transit system,” she promises.

And why the interest in transit?

For her, it has less to do with the safety of the individual and far more to do with our collective safety as citizens of not only the U.S. but the Planet Earth (although the two do go hand in hand).

“It just seems like we’re kind of on a precipice in terms of the precariousness of the environment,” she tells me. “My parents have a farm, I spend a lot of time outdoors, and I think I just spend a lot of time concerned about what could happen if things change dramatically.”

A dramatic change is, of course, exactly what is predicted to come our way if we don’t start investing in sustainable practices on every scale: all the way from the individual to the global.

This new reality is the reason that after growing up in Southeast Iowa and entering the corporate world as a business manager, Nagle-Gamm says she came to realize that “it was time to switch gears and go to school for what I was really interested in, which was environmental science.”

She explains that even though she was an atypical student in age, she felt privileged to work her way through school, and in that way, feel free of any economic obligations to her area of study.

She could get a degree in whatever she wanted and not worry whether it would translate in to a career. She already had one.

“The more I learned about the state of the environment, the more I wanted to learn about the state of the environment,” she says, smiling, “and it’s kind of been the focal point of what I’ve done since that point.”

After finishing an undergraduate degree in environmental science and geography, she went on to earn a master’s in urban planning, both from the University of Iowa. She worked with the Metropolitan Planning Organization of Johnson County for 10 years before jumping at the opportunity to head the City of Iowa City’s mobility efforts as Transportation Director.

But the smooth sailing that seems to characterize her career can’t make up for the fact that she has a lot of challenges ahead of her.

When McGehee spoke of the City of Iowa City and the changes headed their way, he implied a sense of impending doom.

He asked, “what do we do with all these parking ramps in 50 or 100 years, that park thousands of vehicles that don’t need to be in town anymore? How do we make up revenue from parking tickets, and from speeding tickets, and all those kinds of things, when that won’t exist anymore?”

He said, “I think [the city] just can’t really fathom that.”

For Nagle-Gamm, McGehee’s questions are the most exciting ones, the ones that enticed her to take the job. When I ask her about the parking ramps, the changes in revenue, in transportation patterns, she says, “I wish I had more time to think about those things to tell you the truth...but

we're moving in to a stage now, this year, of doing a lot more planning and research, we're carving out time to ask these important questions, because it's the time to do it."

In terms of her vision for Iowa City's future, Nagle-Gamm is all about alternative transportation—or —to correct my word choice with her own:

"I hate that word *alternative*. *Original* modes of transportation. You know, walking, biking—maybe biking wasn't original, but, you know, they've been around longer than automobiles."

Hopeful as she is, though, Nagle-Gamm understands perfectly well how pervasive the automobile's influence has been in the U.S.

"The dollars have shown where the priorities have been," she says. "We're up against years of extreme investment in infrastructure to support personal automobiles, and in many cases, at least in Iowa, that is the easiest form of transportation. It's the required form of transportation if you live in small towns."

For this reality to change, financing has to first.

When McGehee considered all of the questions that Nagle-Gamm is up against, he backed off by saying, "it's still, again, decades away," insisting, "it's nothing they need to plan for in their economic modeling, yet, in principle...now's the time they should probably start looking at that."

This conundrum, to *think* about these problems without the funds to actually *act* on them, is exactly the political reality that Nagle-Gamm operates within.

"If we had unlimited funds, we'd have the best transit system in the world," she says, "we'd have the busses running nonstop down all the arterial corridors. But we don't."

Even the most motivated, sustainability-oriented citizen will probably face a time when they have to drive in the U.S, or at least, when they want to. As I graduate college and look forward to entering the workforce, I am astounded to see that half of the entry level jobs in this country list a car as a requirement. It's no wonder that my generation finds it more appealing than any other to work from home, to make jobs out of the apps on our phones.

McGehee tells me that from his work with young-adults, he believes that my generation is changing the way Americans think about cars. While the vehicle used to be an extension of the self, a prized possession, a symbol of success, he says that today, "I think in your generation, cars are more of an appliance."

Maybe if this is true, my generation can also be the one to demand a better means to an end, to take what Nagle-Gamm believes to heart, and to stop thinking of transportation solely in terms of driving, and instead in terms of mobility.

Mine is the generation of rights.

Our country was founded on the right to express religion and free speech. Then came the movements for women's rights and civil rights. Now, we've seen victories for gay and trans rights. There's more of a focus than ever on environmental rights. We have begun to recognize ableism in our communities and advocate for disability rights. Hyperattention is being cast on immigrant rights. And in a country as big as ours, where the idyllic American home is miles away from the idyllic American job, when thousands of people will die making that commute each year, it's time for a new movement. It's time to demand that human rights come to encompass mobility rights, and it's time to demand an alternative to the pervasive American car.

If we don't, it will only take another few decades of ill-placed investments to turn our *freeways* in to a vehicle for the economic and political entrapment of each and every American driver.

The Private Vehicle is a Threat to Public Equity

The risks of “Driving While Black” are legendary in the United States today, material for critique as well as comedy. A Hollywood film by that name parodied the police surveillance of a pizza delivery man; but real-life traffic stops of African American drivers have resulted in arrests or even death, as in the well-known case of Sandra Bland in Texas. University of Iowa law professor Sarah Seo argues in her recent book *Policing the Open Road* that the Fourth Amendment’s sanction of discretionary policing is the fundamental cause of racial profiling on the road.

It takes only a few words, a few moments, for a former member of the Chicago Police Department to sum up the general sentiment of Seo’s entire academic career when he tells me plainly:

“Every cop profiles. Period. It’s the honest to God truth.”

Price, a mixed-race man who elected to use a pseudonym to speak more freely about his first-hand experiences, says that when police are patrolling the roads actively seeking out arrests, “it doesn’t happen to everybody. It happens to a person who fits the description.”

Price’s time in Maywood, a predominantly black area in Cook County, Illinois, was defined by abnormally high crime rates and an abnormally low budget.

“If you have an impoverished area...there’s nobody paying taxes,” he says. And without the support from state taxes, left to the federal budget, “you’re not getting the funding you need to supply your officers with training.”

“You learn on your own,” he says, “that’s just how it works.”

Police are left to seek out arrests based on their “instincts,” then, and the vehicle code is set up to encourage using that intuition to seek out as many arrests as possible.

“Quota is a taboo word,” Price explains. “They say you have an expectation.”

He elaborates that the Illinois Vehicle Code (IVC), and “really and vehicle code” gives police the power to pull someone over for something as simple as obstruction of view. Essentially, it would be reason enough to pull someone over if “there’s a Christmas tree hanging from your window and you look suspicious,” he says.

To put it more plainly, the policing of our roads is not just what it appears on the surface. Police are not simply monitoring to make sure that the roads are safe but using the roads to seek out and incarcerate as many people as possible, in part to shore up diminishing budgets.

“All these things are put in place to pull people over and get probable cause to arrest them,” Price explains.

Once a car has been stopped, the decision to pursue something minor like Price’s example of possessing a joint, is effectively only a measure of whether that cop wants to be an “asshole.”

“DUI for drugs, those are the best ones,” he says. “We have the authority to force you to have a blood test, and maybe you didn’t smoke marijuana for four days, but it’s still in your system.”

The decision to exercise that authority, and the discretion of the cop to make that choice, is exactly the kind of circumstance which creates space for systemic discrimination. My personal experiences have taught me that as a white cis-gendered woman, I essentially benefit from any bias police may have based on demographics.

I was stopped in Chicago a few months ago for a seatbelt check and the cop smelled marijuana. Even after looking at my Colorado license and asking outright if that had anything to do with the smell, he was all too happy to trust that while my friends had been smoking earlier and smelled like it, I was our sober driver and there was no weed in the car. He shook his head in annoyance and told us to get going.

I have good reason to believe that the same encounter could have changed my life if it weren't for my appearance in terms of race, gender and class.

Data from the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) reports that white and black Americans smoke marijuana on essentially the same basis, but on average, "blacks are 3.73 times more likely than whites to be arrested for marijuana."

In Iowa and Illinois, that number is seven; black skin makes a person *seven* times more likely to be arrested for using a drug that my friends were only barely scolded for, as if they'd eaten too much candy on Halloween.

Of course, marijuana is still illegal in most states. Police still have the right to take it seriously.

In 2015, Stanford developed a partnership between their Computational Journalism and Policy Labs to create [The Stanford Open Policing Project](#), an effort to analyze data about traffic stops from the sparse agencies and municipalities that collect and distribute it.

Stanford's project reports that more than 50,000 drivers are pulled over on any given day, adding up to an astounding 20 million every year. Traffic stops are the single most common type of police interaction, yet some states don't even collect demographics on who they pull over, and those that do aren't always willing to share.

The Open Policing Project was ultimately able to analyze data from 21 willing state patrol agencies and 29 willing municipal police departments across the country, totaling 100 million traffic stops.

Part of their study was to see what the effects were of legalizing marijuana in states like Colorado and Washington. They discovered that there, search rates have dramatically decreased, but the racial disparity remains as to who gets searched more often.

The problem is not the policing itself, but the profiling.

The project determined the not-so-surprising fact that black drivers are stopped at higher rates than white or Hispanic drivers. Not arrested, not searched, just stopped. And once stopped, black and Hispanic drivers are 20 and 30 percent more likely to be ticketed (respectively) and twice as likely to be searched, compared to white drivers.

Trying to decipher the same conclusions from government data is not so simple.

In 2018, [The Bureau of Justice Statistics](#) released demographic data about traffic stops from 2015, but rather than creating statistics based on what percent of the people who were pulled over were which race, they instead based their numbers on the percent of the U.S. population who had contact with the police. With this in mind, the report begins by saying that whites are more likely than African Americans or Hispanics to have police contact.

Then, they concede that when it comes to the police themselves *initiating* the contact, white and black Americans have the *same* likelihood, at 11 percent. Yet the most recent [census data](#) tells us that over 76 percent of the U.S. population is white, and about 13 percent is black.

So, considering how they created these statistics, what The Bureau of Justice really reports is that while there are essentially three white drivers for every black driver, they have the same chance of being stopped. And that is including the stops where they were only a passenger.

Even with their skewed statistics, the Bureau found that when it came to the actual driver in a stop, there was a higher chance that he would be male and be black. The chance of police contact being initiated while the car is stopped is also higher for black drivers. And once police contact has been made, it's not surprising that *twice* the number of black and Hispanic Americans experience non-fatal threat or use of force by police.

Even the tangible degree of deception our government uses to shroud these statistics can't make their numbers seem just.

Owning a car used to be emblematic of the American Dream. But today, the issue of "driving while black" requires us to face the simple fact that our dream was never designed to accommodate diversity, to encourage true equity. It was a dream introduced at the same time as the Federal Highway System, part of a grand scheme to make Americans easy to trace and even easier to incarcerate. And now, whether from a criminal record or just out of fear, the power of police discrimination means that people of color drive less than white Americans. They have lost access to a vehicle designed for physical mobility but promoted by and integrated in to society as a necessity for socioeconomic mobility.

Anthropologist Catherine Lutz even references one Brookings Institute study in her book *Carjacked* that says the difference in employment rates between whites and blacks would be cut in half if they owned cars in equal scale.

As much as this statistic says about the importance of owning a car, it may say even more about the consequences of having to travel some other way. In Chicago, home to the country's second largest transit system, things are still far from perfect when it comes to mass transit.

Part of the reason that Price speaks so freely of his time as a police officer in Maywood is because he has fresh distance now, a different world of problems. He first left the police department to care for his mother. When she passed, he explains, "it was time for a change," and he didn't go back.

Instead, he accepted the opportunity to work for the Chicago Transportation Agency (CTA).

He worked his way up from earning \$12.40 an hour to \$90,000 over 6 and a half years and says proudly that the next step up in his salary will be over six figures. "But I have no life," he adds, in a rush.

As a manager of four different terminals, he's in charge of "the operators, the power men, the switch men, the yard masters, flag men...a lot of people," he says. "And not only do I have to deal with that, but with the travelers."

Chicago's transit system carried 5.1 billion passengers in 2015, according to the [American Public Transportation Association](#), racking up a total of 21.4 billion miles travelled.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [reported](#) in 2014 that a full eight-car CTA train replaces 600 privately operated cars, so 400,000 vehicles are replaced each week by CTA. *Per person*, their information reports that 4,800 pounds of carbon emission are saved by switching to public transit.

Still, the City of Chicago employs one sixth the number of people who work for New York City's mass transit (MTA). And in the City That Never Sleeps, 11 million people use the trains each day. To keep up with that demand also costs \$11 billion.

For all the people that CTA transports, there are many more who would prefer their private vehicle, even if it means sitting in an hour of stop and go traffic, burning a hole in their pocket at the same rate their car burns through fossil fuels and spit greenhouse gasses out at our quickly degrading environment. And a huge part of their choice has to do with CTA's budgeting.

While upgrades to the routes themselves, employee incentives, and safety precautions are the things that Price deems necessary to improve mass transit, he makes it clear that the government budget is allocated inappropriately, purposefully spent in inefficient ways, because the system only rewards the state with more money if they spend every cent of what they have, and fast.

"If you don't utilize the budget that's given to you by the government, you lose it," he says.

"Now that affects your budget next year."

"They're spending the money to places that don't need it because it costs more...you come here and you see some stupid ass shit, like Picassos on the goddamn walls, that they paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for."

His biggest frustration is over the budget is the neglect for the safety of CTA's workers. With the simple edition of a cover for "the third rail," a precaution New York's MTA put in place years ago, "a lot of deaths and stuff could have been prevented," Price says. "But we don't have the funding."

While the budget ignores safety precautions and tries to make the train stations themselves more appealing, there has also been little effort to address the problems occurring on board; the largest

being the homeless population, who has nowhere else to go, but has also brought infestations of bed bugs on board and increased the occurrences of overdoses and public indecency.

Price knows a lot of these homeless people on a first name basis, like the woman he's watched have both her legs amputated over the course of his time at CTA.

"I don't blame them," he says. "They're closing these shelters and there's no place for these people to go in inclement weather...[on the train] they're safe, and they feel comfortable."

While there are rules stopping continuous riding, they're hardly enforced, because the lines the homeless ride either lead them to O'Hare Airport or out to the suburbs. Either way, once they get there, they're told to go right back to the city.

Price promises that while more people continue to use mass transit every year, the quality of service will not improve "unless there's a joint cooperation with all the jurisdictions involved in CTA."

Not only that, but there needs to be communication between police and public transportation, "a mutual understanding between the city," as he puts it.

The fact is that mass transit is not a federal priority at the moment. Not while the consumer economy is still dependent on the interstate highway system and the government is absorbed in paying for it, in part by keeping cars on the road. The public knows that to work and live in the U.S., travel is required, yet the trend toward ride share with Uber and Lyft goes to show how normal it is for transportation to be monetized by private corporations and composed of private vehicles.

If public opinion could change, it's probable that federal priorities would too. Yet Price insists that Americans simply "don't want to be around strangers."

While this justification may have been enough in the past, it's becoming increasingly difficult to defend this choice in the face of the information era and the facts it continues to make plain.

Hop on Twitter and the voice of a young generation is blaring out complaints about driving; about car payments, gas prices, insurance, and yes, about police discrimination. Just weeks ago, I saw a tweet going viral which said simply: "Having a car is great until u have to get an oil change...or an inspection...or a registration sticker...or new tires...or pay for gas."

The tweet received nearly 50,000 likes in 12 days and was retweeted over 14,200 times. The user, @Simplehate, got so many replies (among them, "I'd take that over not having a clear way home any day"), so much attention, that the account was deleted shortly after.

But this issue requires conversation; it requires people speaking out and seeking alternatives.

Because the reality is that choosing to drive means choosing a longer and more costly commute; wasting gas, contributing 4,800 lbs of carbon emissions per person to the planet, perpetuating systemic racial discrimination, and putting people on the road at an alarmingly high rate of injury or death.

But the reality we're all much more aware of is that driving isn't really a choice at all. The only way people live carless today is by relying on ride sharing, which is expensive and does nothing to counter the environmental and personal dangers of the private vehicle.

Using Uber or Lyft still means keeping the roads extremely overcrowded and putting yourself at personal risk as a passenger.

In the past month, a young woman that attended high school with my fiancée in Chicago was killed in a traffic accident outside the city, trapped in the backseat of a burning Uber. Her Blood Alcohol Content had been .01 percent over the legal limit yet doing the right thing and ride hailing did not save her life. The person who hit her was drunk.

“Hands down, you’re safer on public transportation,” Price says.

More pressing yet, who’s to say your Uber or Lyft driver is truly qualified, or is even who they say they are? The police training in Price sees major red flags with ride share’s screening process, or lack thereof, which makes the appeal of public transportation even greater.

“At CTA, we fingerprint everyone that comes in to the company and do a background check every six months,” he says. “Private vehicles are very dangerous...that [CTA] operator is held to a different standard.”

Right now, while cars grant U.S. citizens mobility, they also create a threat to public safety and an economic burden for each driver. The true benefactors from the United States transportation system are car companies, oil and gas companies, companies that rely on prison labor and the police to fill those prisons, and ride share companies who have been smart enough to realize that while Americans are sick of driving, society is still shaped around the private automobile.

The American car has come a long way from its old symbolism of success, and today exists more as a remnant of an ideal that was always somewhat illusory: an American Dream that never encompassed all the diversity and struggle that this country is bound by. Today, if anyone comes to the U.S. to create a new and brighter future, there’s a good chance they will be stuck driving an Uber every day, putting themselves at risk for police scrutiny, and worse yet, for the expensive and dangerous inevitability of a crash.

And the more that citizens train themselves to think as backseat passengers and not drivers, the wider the ideological gap will become between Americans being active participants and passive pawns in the transportation systems which orchestrate our lives. The easier it will become for patterns of systemic discrimination to remain as persistent as our dependence on the private automobile.

It's time for both issues to be addressed, and it might be impossible to eradicate the first without eliminating the later.

Travel is an institutionally shaped force which affects every facet of our existence as Americans, and its time for us to evaluate the consequences of this fact before it's too late and new technology blinds us the way it did with when the Model T swept the country 100 years ago.

This is a technology our planet was never built to sustain, but our society can't seem to live without. To make peace between these two spheres of life, the civic and the cosmic, the everyday and the big-picture, we need to hold ourselves to a "different standard," just as the operators do at CTA.

We need to realize how serious the consequences of our travel patterns are. We need to realize that the way we move around this country, a country founded on freedom, should be a choice, and that this choice is a right we are being denied. We need to listen to our own instincts and the message which Price summed up so well when he said with a sigh, "there's just too much shit going on out here."

Transportation is Changing, Who Decides What's Next?

The most personal artifact I can find in Steven Spears office is the bicycle helmet waiting to return him home. We've just escaped what people called 'polar vortex 2019': The University of Iowa cancelled classes for the first time in a decade due to the temperature, the ice, and the general consensus that no one wanted to be travelling. Conditions have finally returned to the usual Midwest treachery; forecasts in the low teens, salt on sporadic portions of the sidewalks, and a constant, incessant absence of parking space; but still, Spears tells me, he bikes to work each and every day.

"I got in to engineering because I love machines like cars and planes...I love the design of cars, the technical aspects of it, but I hate driving," he tells me, "and I wasn't always that way."

Spears earned his BS in mechanical engineering, but it wasn't until his mid-30s that he decided to go back to school to study transportation planning. Born in England and interested in a career abroad, he began his postgraduate diploma at Cardiff University in Wales, where he traveled throughout Europe using transit and saw firsthand how the physical, built environments of many cities abroad cater to carless living, unlike in the U.S.

"[The UK] had moved beyond the idea that traffic engineering and congestion management were the primary functions of transportation planning," he says. "They were really interested in social and psychological aspects of how people choose to travel."

The same factors have shaped transportation in the U.S. in a very different way, creating a consumer based American car culture. Cars have been marketed for years as the ticket to the American Dream; a mechanical assertion of free choice which has been symbolically associated

with other kinds of mobility: social, political, economic. But after comparing his experiences in the UK to those in the U.S., Spears quickly realized that years of federal investment in highways and roads disproportionately encourage driving a personal vehicle in the U.S. and effectively eliminate an American's ability to "choose to travel" in any other way, at least not without deliberately disadvantaging oneself. Forget the freezing cold carless commute: many jobs won't even hire you if you don't drive. The social and psychological aspects of American travel, then, quickly devolve in to social stigmas associated with *if* an individual drives, *what* he drives, and *how* he drives it.

"I think it's a natural choice," Spears says. "We just don't have good public transportation...it's hard to blame people when the cheapest way of getting around is a car and the fastest way of getting around is a car."

Up until recently, Spears asserts that media and pop culture has inundated Americans with the idea that, "I need to buy a certain vehicle so when I pull in to the parking lot at work it looks a certain way."

Driving has always been *cool*, a part of U.S. popular culture. But today?

While there's no field that necessarily understands, or is explicitly interested, in the ways that driving reinforces social and psychological hierarchies that can lend themselves to racism, classism, and sexism; there *is* indisputable evidence that driving is at least physically destructive, even detrimental.

About 90 people die from driving every day [in the U.S.](#), and gasoline-fueled cars are an enemy of such entities as the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#). If nothing else, driving a car

is a massive economic burden, both personally and politically; tying individuals to infinite economic payments and our country to finite sources of foreign oil that we pay for with more than just money.

As awareness of these issues increases, the number of voluntary drivers decreases. Part of the reason that public transportation has taken off abroad is because the predominant social attitude is in favor of it.

“The idea that was sold to people, especially Americans, many years ago, that driving was freedom and driving was...I don’t know...that it was a positive social thing...I think that’s gone away,” Spears tells me.

He’s not the only professor who bikes to work every day, even though as recently as 10 years ago, he says, “it just wasn’t something people did.”

He sees changes in younger generations as well, and not just the ones in his classroom every day:

“I have a 14-year-old daughter that has no interest in driving, I have a nephew whose in college now who’s the typical profile of someone you’d think would want to drive—you know he’s an athlete, a baseball player—he had no interest in driving when he was in high school and had someone else drive him around most of the time.”

It seems to him that, quite plainly, “the appeal that driving had at one time is going away.”

So, what’s next?

This shifting social perception lines up conveniently with a technological one; and in the digital era, the ways Americans work and the ways they commute may be more closely tied than we

would assume. Urban planners like Spears are hyper-aware of how the internet makes it increasingly possible to work remotely or on the road, and that automation is on its way to replacing drivers and a number of jobs as well.

Spears explains, “the combinations of ride sharing and automation coming together at the same time is really one of the bigger issues that transportation planners face.”

In Iowa City, a group of graduate students in his department are conducting applied research trying to “bridge the two interests” of the National Advanced Driving Simulator and the City of Iowa City, hoping to design a plan that integrates automated vehicles to encourage sustainable, accessible public transportation.

Bo Kapatsila, a graduate student working on the project, explains it this way:

“We want to ensure that this technology will only increase accessibility and mobility for people across the board, meaning with no difference to income or social status That led us to focus on public transit.”

“We’re still going to see fixed route busses,” he explains, but the hope is that automated vehicles operating similar to Lyft and Uber could help people get from their homes to the transit route.

“I think that’s the big promise and the bright picture of the future,” he says.

Kapatsila is from the Ukraine, where he explains that the cities are dense, 500 to 1,000 years old, with hardly enough room for all the people, let alone a car for every adult, as we so often expect in the U.S. Most city roads are exclusively for pedestrians, and transit is the backbone of transportation, starting to run underground in most recent years.

Transit hasn't had the same utility in the U.S. While Spears was earning his PhD at UC Irvine's School of Social Ecology, he got involved with research on one of the US's first real investments in public transportation: a new light rail line in Los Angeles called the Exposition light rail. After working with Neighborhood Travel and Activity Study for years, he was left with a muddy impression of the light rail's personal implications for travel habits, but a clear image of its practical use:

"Light rail is very expensive to put in, and there is an appeal for people to want to live near it," he says. "So, the light rail is put somewhere for two reasons: one is for transportation, the other is sort of economic development."

Cities like Des Moines are dwarfs when it comes to such an investment, left relying on bus routes. And even if those routes are reliable, Spears explains that their social perception is fairly inflexible.

"A light rail system that people see as modern and clean and frequent versus a bus system where, it's a bus. You know? There's nothing glamorous about riding the bus," he says with a laugh.

"Even if the service is pretty good, it's definitely a perceptual thing that people have."

He tells me that in LA, the light rails have been added at the expense of non-rail services which may need to be discontinued; "which brings up some equity issues," he says, smile fading.

This commodification and luxuriation of transportation is Kapatsila's biggest fear. He tells me that at an [American Automobile Association](#) conference on automated vehicles in Iowa City last fall, the leading scientists were all speaking about private vehicles.

“There’s very little conversation about shared vehicles, though it’s the area where the promises automation brings can be actually equitable and make sense, to be honest,” he says, “...if public policy fails to deliver this we will probably see more cars on the roads and they will just be automated and people will, I don’t know, play Candy Crush on their way to work.”

Spears and Kapatsila understand better than most the way our built environment can orchestrate our everyday lives. Yet they both, also, exemplify an individual’s agency: one with his bike, one with his feet.

Kapatsila reveals that his first time in the U.S. he felt trapped in a small town in Wisconsin, where he could not “get out” without a car. The next time he came back, he went to New York City, where he was happy to walk 50 blocks each day to work. He chose Iowa City, in part, because he’d be able to go where he needed on foot.

He has a license because he can, “just in case,” as he says. He tells me maybe he’ll drive when he has a family one day. I imagine him driving to school, to soccer or choir practice, grabbing groceries and stuffing them in to an SUV.

“I came to America with this idea that the car is the villain of all problems,” he says, “I have a new theory that it’s how we use it.”

“My bike use is so habitual that I won’t get on the bus even if the weather is bad, and people do that with their car,” Spears explains.

In the language of social ecology, decision making is affected by overlapping spheres of influence that range from the individual psychological aspects to the interpersonal, the

infrastructural, and the policy level. So, while driving dependency is orchestrated by our built environment, the individual is always at the heart of an issue like this.

“It’s partly an attitudinal thing,” Spears adds, “but it’s also just—bring your travel decisions to a conscious level and not a habitual level.”

For those of us who have the physical, economic, and social privilege to drive; his plea is a reminder that our country’s policies will always appeal to the masses, and that our choices as consumers run deep, down to the last drop of natural resources that disappear each time we drive, to the last cent we spend on the newest model of the American Dream.

“We have some really pressing environmental issues, we have pressing social issues that revolve around cars, equity issues,” he says, bluntly, by the time I’m about to zip myself back inside a knee-length parka and waddle my way to class on an ice rink sidewalk. “I hope that people will drive less.”

Reflecting on this Project and on Personal Privilege

My time at the Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication, more than anything, helped me learn what my most comfortable, confident, and effective style of writing is. By balancing a load of classes from Book Writing to Applied Digital Media, Journalistic Reporting and Writing to Magazine Writing, I saw the wide range of possibilities within this world of journalistic storytelling, and found a niche for myself by merging feature reporting and personal writing, bringing my own stories and outside knowledge in to reports injected with the voices of my sources. Reporting this series of stories on American car culture, I also discovered that my sense of ethics urges me to speak my own personal opinion rather than relying on a what could be a false sense of objectivity. As Brent Cunningham explained in his article in the Columbia Journalism Review “Re-thinking Objectivity,” if journalists always attempt to portray the world “as it is,” rather than how we want it to be, we run the risk of “allowing the principle of objectivity to make us passive recipients of news, rather than aggressive analyzers and explainers of it.” This analyzing and explaining is something I feel my second degree in creative writing helped me learn, as I focused mostly on essay writing. For this reason, this Honors Thesis in journalism allowed me to combine my two styles to produce editorial writing and make my reports a call to action for readers.

Throughout this reflection I will refer to texts and resources like Cunningham’s which guided my learning in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, but I feel that it’s important to note that for me, the most effective style in my classes was experiential. I improved as a journalist every time I put myself in a new situation, had a new conversation, and learned just the right questions to ask. I learned to look for the changes in voice and body language which told me that my source was getting excited or starting to feel defensive. I learned to do my

research and start each interview off by building rapport and conveying that I was not only a reporter but a person, not only interviewing but genuinely interested. I learned to sit in silences and wait for my source to say more. I learned that some of the best quotes come at the end of the interview, when I would always ask if there was anything they had to add. More than anything, though, my experiences also helped teach me which stories are worth telling.

I knew from the start that a project about car culture was worth pursuing, because I see the story unfolding everywhere around me. With more cars than people in this country, our entire population is subservient to the industries which create our vehicles, the resources which fuel them, and the government which provides and patrols the roads where we use them. As the Society of Professional Journalist's Code of Ethics encourages in its preamble, "public enlightenment" was always my motivation in this project. I want people to be aware of the injustices I see occurring. My criticism doesn't fall on one person or even one organization, but on the built environment of our society and the intersecting factors which make it so, creating a criticism which is relevant, albeit abstract. These motivations felt ethical to me, as my education taught me that the best journalists write with intent, always advocating for truth and to contribute to a "marketplace of ideas."

Two theories from Black and Roberts' *Doing Ethics in Media* pit opposite views of the "marketplace of ideas" against one another: the classical liberal theory defends the idea that people will generally make competent decisions in an open market of ideas and so propagandists deserve a voice to stimulate the economy and political discourse; the modern social responsibility theory counters that the market of ideas is dominated by the agenda with the most money and that the government should protect us from advertisers, PR practitioners, and propagandists. What I find newsworthy about the topic of driving in the U.S. is that it is an

institution embedded in to our everyday lifestyle so thoroughly that advertisers and government are both to blame in keeping people reliant on the personal vehicle. I hope that the topic of car dependence in the U.S. can become a brand-new franchise in the “marketplace of ideas,” and that my reports can be provocative without slipping in to propaganda.

Every time I see a car commercial guaranteeing a false sense of freedom instead of the reality of the daily commute, I want to paint it as villainous propaganda. Yet as my mind grew more attached to this idea, it became more and more difficult to stop myself from reducing the issue of car dependency in to simple causes and solutions and effectively producing my own propaganda. I tried to remind myself of how that word was defined by Black and Roberts to make sure that I was staying far away from any of its characteristics.

Part of the definition of propaganda is relying too heavily on authority figures; like a car commercial with just one testimonial from someone who’s probably an actor anyway. In my work, I made an effort to illustrate how much outside research I have done, and how much each individual should be encouraged to do on their own to learn more about this topic. The use of hyperlinks became important to each of these reports, sometimes to cite a source, often to lead readers to an article or website which could expand the conversation outside of my writing. Each of my stories did rely very heavily on one or two sources, though, and so I did my best to use their voices to create narrative and a human appeal, without having them do the actual reporting for me. For that, I used data from reliable sources such as university and government reports.

Another tendency of propaganda is to divide people or groups in to fixed categories of friends and enemies, and to focus more on conflict than cooperation. I found myself most guilty of this in the report I wrote about economic interests, where I had to consult ahead of time with my advisor about the decision to essentially pit my sources against one another. I was

encouraged to do so only when my advisor reflected that, based on their biographies, it was ultimately their interests that were already in conflict, and so I could report the story that way without villainizing one of my sources. In addition, while Dan McGehee with the National Advanced Driving Simulator became emblematic of car dependency and central to my critique, I tried to maintain that his goal of improving the safety of our vehicles is admirable and he's simply complicit in a larger system which I see as broken.

I again ran in to some ethical uncertainty concerning sources when the central informant for my third report asked that his name not be associated with the story at all. He used to work for the Chicago Police Department and now is employed by the Chicago Transportation Association, and his reputation and even job could be at risk by attributing him to a story that's so critical of his employers. What's more, he made it very evident how disliked the police already are, and how assigning his name to a quote like "all cops profile" could even cause a threat to his life.

The SPJ Code of Ethic's stance against anonymity is to ensure that "the public is entitled to as much information as possible to judge the reliability and motivations of sources." For this reason, they say it should be reserved for "sources who may face danger, retribution or other harm, and have information that cannot be obtained elsewhere." The way I see it, my source would in fact have been less reliable if he were speaking on behalf of the government organizations which control his reputation. He would not have been as honest. The information he had that I could not obtain elsewhere was the insight of personal experience, and so his motivation to remaining anonymous was simply to be able to speak freely. For that reason, I am resolved with my decision to use a pseudonym and be transparent with my readers about why.

Other than this breach in standard reporting practice, I feel that this Honors Thesis doesn't encroach on any other journalistic ethics.

For instance, there is nothing overly sensational about this story, and in fact the one time I found myself falling in to that pattern, writing about a gruesome car crash my friend witnessed, explaining how she had to hold a dying woman to find the motivation to stop driving, I ended up deleting the paragraph. I read it back and realized how much the bloody scene dirtied my moral conscious. I did not want to rely on fear tactics in my writing, I did not want to exploit the suffering of a human being to get my point across. I decided to let logic and statistics speak for me when it came to driving's lethality. Still, as someone who studies creative writing and especially adores personal essays, one thing that I think sets my journalistic style apart from others is an intimate and honest voice punctuated by personal experience and analysis. I do not like to hide who I am or what I think.

While this conviction could be controversial to a lot of journalists, it is an opinion that I felt was supported by my education at the University of Iowa. In fact, one of the strongest memories I have of my time in the classroom came from a question from the professor who would go on to advise this project years later. She asked how we can claim that there's such a thing as objective truth when we can't always agree on the difference between green and blue. To me, telling the truth means claiming whether you, personally, see something as blue, or as green, and yes, using "I." I was able to practice this technique in my Feature Writing and Magazine Writing courses, and my professor Michael Judge even said when he read a personal essay of mine, he thought I'd found my style.

"Believe in your own identity and your own opinions," William Zinsser writes in his book *On Writing Well*, which became my Writing Bible shortly after it was assigned to me by

Professor Don McLeese. Zinsser insists, “Writing is an act of ego, and you might as well admit it.” I believe this idea was central to the SPJ’s decision to remove the rhetoric of objectivity from its Code of Ethics in 1996. To choose each story based on its “newsworthiness” and to pretend that’s an objective process is simply untrue. While I tried to let my balance of sources create an argument for me, I also decided not to shy away from adding my opinion to these reports. The Code of Ethics seems to encourage this by insisting that journalists “examine the ways their values and experience may shape their reporting.” In order to follow the SPJ’s guideline more closely and to “differentiate between opinion and impartial news coverage,” it only made sense for me to use the first person “I” at times. While the summer I spent reporting at The Daily Iowan nearly eradicated this choice entirely, *I* feel sure that this report would not be as comprehensive, honest, and interesting if *I* didn’t make my personal experiences and motivations clear. *I* find it liberating to embrace my own ego, and can’t thank William Zinsser and Profs. Judge and McLeese enough for making me feel like that was okay.

After all, driving is a personal activity, and our cars in America tend to express something of ourselves. My interest in this topic began a long time ago, when I wrote my college admission essay about the inside of my car, and how that is a place where I am most myself. I went on to attempt writing a personal essay about road tripping with my fiancée, in my Magazine Writing course, but ended up getting distracted by billboards dotting the highway from Texas to Iowa. My essay turned in to an analysis of what they conveyed to me, an essay about how the countries highways can be so exploitive. I thought I was writing a love letter to the American Highway but found myself instead writing a report about how driving is like an addiction, like smoking and drinking, the things advertised mile after mile. Driving is expensive, harmful, and impossible to quit. When I came to Professor Gigi Durham with the idea, I explained the car to

Americans is like an abusive partner we simply can't say no to, even though Mother Earth does not approve.

The function of these reports became to elaborate on this idea, on the causes and consequences of car dependency, as well as to try predicting what may come next. By seeking out the voices of some of the people most educated and involved in these issues, and combining their ideas with statistical facts, I was able to craft three reports: the first focused on any social or psychological aspects that influence travel choices on the individual level, the second followed the money trail to expand on how travel choices are influenced at an institutional level, and the third explored the policing of our roads to understand how car dependency keeps us subject to discretionary, and often discriminatory, uses of police power.

Preparing these reports allowed me to apply everything I've learned about ethics and the mission of a journalist in a more independent way, having to hold myself accountable for the entire process of researching, interviewing, and writing. This autonomy and the sheer amount of time put in to this project allowed me to also take an inventory of my own opinions and experiences of car dependency. I tried to always remember that along with the road trip from Texas, the spark which really put this project in perspective was a speeding ticket I received last year and the online driver's safety course I had to take to satisfy the court. I'd wanted to laugh when the first question asked me whether driving is a constitutional right, or a privilege. The answer seemed obvious: the constitution makes no mention of cars. But at the same time, the decoy made me really consider how privileged it makes me that my parents bought my car and paid all of the expenses for it, that the color of my skin and my gender makes me less likely to draw police attention, that I've had not just my license but an operating vehicle and the money to drive it since the moment I turned 16. I was raised to think of driving as a right because it is so

ingrained in my life, and so these reports effectively became a way for me to examine my own privilege and hope that it would apply to others as well.

Examining my privilege taught me that the “American Dream” which we are all taught to aspire to is ultimately something that I was born in to. The “American Dream,” and the fact that it is epitomized by a car, is just a dream of material comfort, social and economic mobility that it’s more theatrical to think of in terms of an engine, four wheels, and miles of open road. The University of Iowa’s Theme Semester decided to interrogate this idea through campus and community events all semester long, trying to envision what a more inclusive “American Dream” would look like in a country as diverse as ours. As a member of the planning committee for the Theme Semester, I decided that with my project would consider not just how the car has symbolized this dream, but how an alternative mode of transportation could also mean an alternative trajectory for this country. It seems that chasing the “American Dream” by chasing the next best car has only entrenched this country in systemic discrimination and environmental degradation with the same relentless trajectory as my little Subaru Impreza, speeding down Interstate 76 at 103 miles per hour, before a state trooper stopped me to say that if I didn’t slow down, I was headed toward disaster. I hope that this Honors Thesis expresses just how much his message resonated, and I hope that it can give the same warning to others who may need to hear it as much as I did.

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